

Executive Summary
Final Evaluation Report
“Quantum Leap” Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs
Mount Anthony Union High School, Bennington Vermont
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Introduction to Evaluation Findings: It is difficult to do justice to a program that has transformed the lives of a significant number of students who were chronically truant and on the verge of dropping out of school. The Quantum Leap programs demonstrate that this can be done through exemplary leadership adopting a philosophy of doing whatever it takes to engage individual students in learning. Characterized by respect, caring, flexibility and high expectations, the Quantum Leap programs offer students options for supportive environments in which to negotiate multiple issues that get in the way of learning. This evaluation focused on three truancy and dropout prevention programs at Bennington: the Quantum Leap Classroom, the Academic Mentoring Program, and the Project Leap After School Program. This Executive Summary gives a synopsis of the qualitative and quantitative findings from the full report.

Qualitative Findings: The qualitative part of the study involved interviews with 55 stakeholders, including students, families, school staff, program personnel, and community partners. These stakeholders described improved school attendance and engagement, better grades, stronger social skills and enhanced self esteem. A few quotes highlight these outcomes:

- *Quantum Leap changed my whole aspect on school and education. I used to hate school. Now I still come back to high school one or two times a week to visit. (Quantum Leap Classroom Graduate)*
- *I became more outgoing, more accepting. I grew a stronger personality. It helped me find myself. I improved my grades and was able to better myself. I matured too. (Project Leap Program Graduate)*
- *I’m definitely a lot more mature. I used to not think before I did things – be very impulsive. Now if I get mad, I think before I do anything. (Academic Mentoring Student)*
- *He would have quit without it. His anxiety is down. He has goals. (Parent)*
- *I’ve never seen kids respond this way....I’ve seen kids who really struggle in school excel in Quantum Leap. (Community Juvenile Caseworker)*

According to the views and experiences of stakeholders, these programs are effective because the leadership is collaborative and inspired, with a focus on individual relationships to enhance learning. The programs encompass a vital connection between the school, Bennington College and the broader community. In addition, they foster self-determination and use experiential learning in an environment of support.

Fostering Self-Determination: Each Quantum Leap program seeks to tap into a student’s inner motivation to learn, applying Bennington College’s experiential and relationship-based pedagogy: to develop a one to one relationship with each student, find out student interests, and tap into those interests to help young people find their own motivation to explore and contribute to their world.

Variety of Supportive Programs for Students of Promise: Quantum Leap provides a variety of programs for students with varied needs and styles of learning. Elements of a supportive program that emerged from the interviews include the physical environment, compassionate clarification of expectations, and sensitivity to student home situations as well as their need for privacy. Furthermore, supportive programs offer ways to participate that avoid stigmatization by peers, allow students to keep up with their studies while attending to other problems in their lives, and match students to the appropriate program. Most importantly, supportive programs are flexible. They encourage communication and mutual support between teachers and program staff. In addition, they maintain viable connections with parents and guardians.

Utilizing Experiential Learning: Quantum Leap incorporates various experiential, “hands-on” activities to engage students in learning. Each program tailors curriculum around student interests and uses these interests as a doorway to learning about other disciplines and the larger world. For example, the Academic Mentoring Program connects student interests to school subjects and engages them in dialogue. The Project Leap Afterschool Program involves participants in games and field trips that foster social interaction and self confidence. The Quantum Leap Classroom engages students in preparing for an end of semester exhibit of work, open to the community. This exhibit is not only engaging for the students but impressive to the public who attends. In addition, students find small classes, individual attention, and independent learning beneficial. Students and their families described many extraordinary outcomes due to this style of instruction.

Vital Connection with Bennington College and the Larger Community: Many stakeholders saw the vital connection between Bennington College, the school, and the community as key to Quantum Leap’s success with truancy and dropout prevention. The program originated through collaboration between Bennington College, the local court, and the school, emphasizing an approach based on mediation. In addition, it demonstrated the effectiveness of tapping students’ internal motivation to learn through simply asking about their interests.

Inspired and Collaborative Leadership Focused on Individual Relationships to Enhance Learning: The leadership observed at Mt. Anthony High School was exemplary, creative and centered on individual needs and goals of students, including those students who are in need of individual support to remain and thrive in school. Critical to the overall success of the programs was the involvement of community partners from Bennington College, the Catamount Regional Partnership, the local Department of Children and Families, the School Board and the High School. The support, insights and collaborative leadership both within the school and the community have sustained the programs for students who otherwise might not have succeeded. The combined knowledge, commitment and leadership demonstrated from varied stakeholders in the community encouraged the expansion of these creative and productive learning opportunities.

Recommendations for Replicating, Sustaining and Improving Quantum Leap Programs: In addition to the findings above, stakeholders emphasized strongly that not only are committed and flexible people with skills in mentoring and mediation necessary, but also the funding and benefits to keep them. Everyone expressed enthusiasm for continuing the programs, often suggesting careful expansion with an emphasis on quality. Funding was seen as the most important aspect of program sustainability.

Quantitative Findings: The quantitative part of the evaluation focused on the characteristics and outcomes of the three programs named above: Quantum Leap Classroom, Academic Mentoring and Project Leap After School. These three programs were initiatives within the larger scope of the Southwest Supervisory Union's regular school programs at Mount Anthony Union High School. Therefore, comparisons between groups of students formed by the programs and the general school population were made in order to estimate the effects of providing somewhat more specialized services to groups of students who were identified by school staff as 'at risk of poor academic performance and dropping out.'

The rate of withdrawal from school is perhaps the most important of all the outcome measures as it signals the end of students' academic programs. By this measure, two of the three programs yield outcomes for at-risk students which are at least as good and, in the case of the Project Leap Program, better than the general school population. The fact that the Mentor program yields a graduation rate only slightly different from the general population is important when considering that all students in all three programs are at risk of dropping out. The fact that any of these students persist, even at a rate less than the general population, is important to the students who maintain their enrollment and to their parents. It is also important to note that the overall dropout rate for the school increased by 1% in 2006, but the cohort dropout rate decreased by 9% between 2004 and 2005. Other academic outcomes such as test scores and absence rates likewise indicate a positive contribution of these programs to the academic careers and life prospects for these students.

Conclusion: The Quantum Leap programs were designed to help students achieve and all have been enormously effective in keeping students in school. Not only that, but several of the students reported that they were hoping to continue their education once they had graduated. The graduates we spoke with were either attending college, making plans to attend, or working. All of these programs have been successful in engaging students in taking responsibility for their learning and if the resources were available, even more students would participate. The Bennington community has demonstrated their ability to work together to improve the outcomes for students who struggle in school. The creative projects, caring skills, and willingness to cross professional borders has led to positive outcomes for students and families. These programs, made possible through inspired and joint leadership, will hopefully continue and expand.